

Focusing on foster care in Inyo

Commission working to attract new foster parents, establish local group home

By Mike Bodine
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There is a shortage of foster parents in Inyo County, and in response, a group of foster parents, elected officials and government agencies is trying to find fresh recruits.

The Inyo County Foster Care Commission is continuing to seek out new foster parents as it works with the tribe and moves forward with a new local foster group home.

According to the commission, the number of foster parents in Inyo County varies depending on who is asked or how a foster parent is defined. Some sources say there are really only four — for all of Inyo and Mono counties — and there is **only** one Native American foster parent. These

Members of the Inyo County Foster Care Commission received a generous donation of backpacks and other luggage that foster children will be able to take with them when removed from their homes. Shown here are (l-r) Inyo County Superior Court Presiding Judge Dean Stout, Toiyabe Executive Director David Lant, Inyo HHS Director Jean Turner, Rotarian and foster parent Jeff Griffiths, HHS Children's Social Services Licensing Specialist Kathy Rose, HHS Assistant Director Linda Benson, Rotarian Julie Faber, Chief Probation Officer Jeff Thompson, Third District Inyo County Supervisor Bev Brown and HHS Executive Secretary Gina Ellis.

Photo by Mike Bodine

parents are the ones that take in a child for a day or two to go to court, or take a child in on a moment's notice.

There are several more that are family members of the child that act as foster parents, and may eventually adopt the child as their own, and some foster parents that are awaiting to adopt. There are still more who have been on the list of available foster parents but a suitable match has not been made with them,

sometimes for years.

At a recent Foster Care Commission meeting, Health and Human Services Director Jean Turner spoke of how the area lost many foster parents years ago to water. Some state licensing folks visited the area and revoked the foster parent licenses of any resident that had water in their yards. Water, from a two-inch wide trickling creek to a swimming pool, was considered a safety hazard and had to be fenced.

Unfortunately, the same people who could afford a house with a creek in the front yard were also the folks most likely to be able to afford and properly house a foster child.

These laws have since been relaxed, but water still needs to be fenced in for children 10 and under, and children 10 and older have to attend a water safety course.

However, offering safety courses, even CPR and First Aid classes, and offering them on the Reservation was seen as a way to get more Native parents interested in becoming foster parents, too.

Interested parents must take CPR and First Aid courses as part of their eight hours of training.

Commission member and foster parent Jeff Griffiths said, "The training is easy," but there is a thick packet of paperwork and forms that need to be completed.

Fellow Commission member Judge Dean Stout said, "My goal is to make the process quick and user friendly, to make it simple."

"A 'hold your hand' approach," Griffiths said.

The meeting held at the Toiyabe Indian Health Project was a way of building a partnership with the tribe,

Stout and others have said in the past that there is an inordinate amount of Native children who, through neglect or dependency by themselves or their parents, are in need of foster care. These are the same kids who are known to get in trouble in a foster home out of the area, just so they can be incarcerated in the Eastern Sierra — their home.

The commission is also working with the Tribe to develop a group foster home, something sorely lacking in the area.

Chief Probation Officer Jeff Thompson said that the licensing for the home and interested parents are moving along. In fact, Thompson told the commission that many of the licensing requirements for staff could be done ahead of time, creating a shovel-ready project that will be ripe for grant funding.

He said he has been working with folks from the state, helping Inyo move forward with a foster home. "They make it all sound pretty simple," but it's the financial end of it that will not be easy in this recession.

Because Inyo and Mono counties lack facilities and foster parents are in short supply, many children are forced to be housed out of the area, and many in a rush.

To help make the transition smooth, the Bishop Sunrise Rotary donated backpacks and duffle bags to Health and Human Services so foster kids can have their own luggage.

And as Stout said, "It is something that's theirs," noting that more often than not a foster kid is swept from their home, often reduced to having to shove belongings into plastic bags. "This way they can have some dignity, too."



Inyo and Mono counties are in need of foster parents — there are less than four parents in both counties, and only one Native American parent, that are willing to accept any child in need.

Photo courtesy of MonoCreativeConnections

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